

VZCZCXYZ0000  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRB #0224/01 0371841  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 061841Z FEB 07  
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5780  
INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 4310  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3219  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 5653  
RUEHMK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 3414  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 4527  
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 9198  
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2629

UNCLAS RABAT 000224

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG; PM FOR HUMANITARIAN DEMINING - RKIDD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [KHDP](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: LANDMINES CLAIM LIVES, SPARK  
INTEREST IN DEMINING

1. (SBU) Summary: Several recent landmine incidents, with at least three deaths, highlight the continuing danger of landmines in the Western Sahara. Two prominent Sahrawi figures, one a local leader and CORCAS member, the other a member of the upper house of parliament, were killed when the vehicles they were traveling in hit mines. Moroccan press has predictably blamed the Polisario, and to a lesser extent the Spanish military, for the deaths; the Polisario has traditionally claimed that Moroccan-placed mines are to blame for landmine deaths. MINURSO does not believe that the three deaths are a result of recent Polisario action, but could result from mines placed in the 1980's. The Moroccan military is launching an enhanced anti-mine effort in the territory. Humanitarian landmine action may be appropriate, perhaps with USG support. See Action Request Para 9. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On January 18, Mohamed Lamine Laaroussi, an upper house member of parliament from the Istiqlal party, was killed when the off-road vehicle he was traveling in unexpectedly hit a landmine near Bir Anzaran (160 km northeast of Dakhla). Three other passengers in the vehicle were injured. Mohamed Khatri Joumani, the president of the Guelmat Zemmour commune and a member of CORCAS, was killed January 22 in a similar accident in an area about 250 km northeast of Dakhla. Joumani, a former parliamentarian, died from injuries suffered when a mine exploded near his vehicle; three others in the vehicle were injured. An eight year old girl was also fatally wounded January 22 near Al-Haouza (200 km from Smara) when the explosive she and her brother were playing with detonated. The Moroccan press and NGO community has predictably blamed the Polisario, and to a lesser extent the Spanish military, for the recent landmine deaths. On the other hand, the Polisario has traditionally claimed that Moroccan-placed landmines are to blame for accidental deaths. We have not yet seen any Polisario comment on the recent deaths.

3. (SBU) In response to the three deaths, King Mohamed VI on January 23 reportedly sent a very high-level delegation to Laayoune to pay condolences to the families of those recently killed by the mine explosions. The delegation was lead by Minister of Interior Chakib Benmoussa, and included Minister of Education Habib El Malki, CORCAS President Khalihenna Ould Errachid, MOI Minister-Delegate Fouad Ali El Himma, as well as several walis and governors. According to press sources, in addition to attending the funeral of Mohamed Khatri Joumani, the delegation was also charged with examining

potential strategies to safely and efficiently de-mine the territory and educate local citizens on the dangers associated with unexploded mines.

¶4. (U) Moroccan press reported January 27 that six teams specializing in de-mining from the Moroccan military will soon be sent to the Western Sahara. The teams will undertake a large de-mining campaign in the territory, likely focusing much of their efforts in the region of Smara, which is an area known to be particularly hazardous. Moroccan army deminers have just returned from an assistance mission in Senegal. According to official statistics reported in the Moroccan press, since 1980 Morocco has recovered and destroyed over 20,000 anti-tank mines and over 44,000 antipersonnel mines.

¶5. (SBU) The Moroccan berm defensive line in the Sahara was built in stages, beginning close to Laayoune in the 1980s. Each iteration was built closer to the borders of the territory and the current line covers the vast preponderance of the trackless desert that is the Sahara. The Moroccans mined the external facing sides of the berm, and it is not clear to what extent they de-mined the old berm, when they expanded control to the areas of each new berm.

¶6. (SBU) According to the Moroccan Association for Mine Victims, since 1979 mines have been responsible for more than 360 deaths, with the highest number of victims being children. More than 600 additional people have been wounded during the same period. The association also claims that mines once laid by the Polisario and the Spanish military pose the largest threat to the region's population. According to Moroccan press, landmines laid by the Moroccan military are less threatening than those of the Polisario

because the military possesses maps detailing the exact location of all explosive devices laid by Morocco. (Note: While these maps may exist, many observers note that given the constantly changing nature of the sand where many mines have been laid, the maps are unlikely to accurately reflect the mines' current locations. End Note.) Meanwhile, "official" statistics reported by the press claim higher casualty and injury figures. According to unnamed "official sources", since 1975 landmines have injured 1610 individuals and have fatally wounded 534.

¶7. (SBU) On February 2, MINURSO Force Commander General Kurt Mosgaard confirmed to polcouns that Moroccan de-mining elements have moved into place and will soon begin a large-scale de-mining operation. Commenting on the three deaths, Mosgaard explained that according to local Moroccan military officers, Laaroussi and Joumani died in explosions caused by old anti-tank mines placed between 1984-1985, whereas the young girl was probably handling a wartime unidentified explosive object or an antipersonnel mine. MINURSO does not have reason to believe that the three deaths are a result of recent Polisario mine-laying operations. More recently, a Moroccan NGO recently claimed that the Polisario was planting mines to limit access to Tifariti, also a claim without foundation, according to MINURSO. So far as we understand, MINURSO does not have a specific mine action mandate.

Comment

-----

¶8. (SBU) While antipersonnel anti-tank mines left behind from the armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario have been responsible for deaths in the Western Sahara in the past, particularly among local nomads and others who travel through the region via unpaved roads and surfaces, the recent deaths of several high-profile Sahrawis have highlighted the sensitive nature of this issue. The King's swift reaction, by sending a royal delegation to Laayoune, signals the governments resolve to keep this incident from serving as a catalyst for local protests. While the presence of six de-mining teams will likely be welcomed by the population, it remains to be seen, however, if local associations will call

for more immediate de-mining of the area from the GOM or other sources. End Comment.

Can the U.S. Help?

-----  
19. (SBU) Action Request: While the USG avoids providing assistance within the disputed Western Sahara territory, humanitarian considerations may argue in favor of providing some mine action support. We have seen an NGO, Landmine Action, at work in the Western Sahara, on the far side of the berm, in the Polisario-controlled town of Tifariti. They reported to us, in late 2006, that they had submitted a proposal to the Department for funding work in that part of the Western Sahara. We are unaware of any current USG programs in the territory and are uncertain whether the GOM would be interested in a civil demining program; other aspects of mine actions could be of greater interest. Washington may wish to consider a humanitarian demining or mine awareness on both sides of the berm. If so, we can informally discuss it with the GOM. However, any initiative in the Western Sahara would need to be coordinated with all concerned.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>  
\*\*\*\*\*

Riley